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A War of Nerves

Flurry of Conferences Indicates Decision Imminent on Peace

By Murrey Marder

Washington Post Staff Writer

President Nixon appeared to be on the verge of a decision yesterday in what one diplomatic source described as "a war of nerves" between Washington and Saigon over a cease-fire settlement of the Vietnamese war.

A series of high-level conferences on Vietnam is under way inside the Nixon administration, White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler reported yesterday. This pattern is often the prelude to a major presidential decision, although Ziegler forecast no announcement. He said there is "no plan . . . at this time" for President Nixon to speak on Vietnam before Christmas.

Kissinger conferred with the President for the fourth time yesterday since Kissinger's return Wednesday from his Paris negotiations with Le Duc Tho, who also left Paris yesterday saying that he and Kissinger agreed not to make any statement on the negotiations.

That Kissinger-Tho agreement would indicate that any public comment about the state of the prolonged negotiations between Washington and Hanoi on taking the United States out of the war will be limited.

The critical issue at this stage is South Vietnam's strong objection to the nine-point package negotiated between the United States and North Vietnam, or alternatively, the possibility of a separate peace settlement between Washington and Hanoi, over the head of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu.

In addition to Kissinger's meetings with the President, Ziegler said, Kissinger talked Thursday with Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kissinger had breakfast yesterday with Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird and later scheduled meetings with Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and with Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"The purpose of these meetings," Ziegler said, "is for consultations on the negotiations."

Kissinger, it appeared, was canvassing senior officials on the course that President Nixon will take in dealing with the Saigon government's opposition to the proposed war settlement.

There was speculation in Paris and Saigon yesterday that the United States now may seek, or threaten to seek, a separate peace settlement with North Vietnam.

the release of [American] POWs, in exchange for ending the bombing and mining of the north, for U.S. troop withdrawal and for an end to U.S. military and economic aid to the south."

This possibility of a total cutoff of U.S. aid, Thieu conceded, is the major danger that signing a separate U.S.-North Vietnamese peace settlement holds for South Vietnam.

Said Thieu:

"If we, the Republic of Vietnam, did not accept an unreasonable formula allowing North Vietnamese troops to stay in the south, in addition to the points the United States must carry out, the Communists would at least demand that the U.S. government end its military and economic aid to the Republic of Vietnam."

South Vietnam "must continue to fight for its independence, freedom, survival and peace," said Thieu. "The RVN does not hesitate to continue the struggle," he said, "but it needs assistance to fight alone, because this is the only way it can save itself."

Having posed the dilemma of adverse choices for the Saigon regime, Thieu avoided stating which road it would take. Instead, he counter-proposed an experimental cease-fire starting at Christmas with an exchange of prisoners and direct talks between Saigon and the Communist parties. The White House on Thursday explicitly spurned that formula.

Thieu, in turn, holds the card for blocking, or at least seriously impeding, the internationally supervised standstill cease-fire in the U.S.-North Vietnamese settlement plan.

That cease-fire is the starting point for a total U.S. troop withdrawal from South Vietnam in 60 days, the release of American prisoners of war, and the creation of a three-segment National Council of Reconciliation

and Concord to supervise elections for a new government in South Vietnam.

By withholding agreement to the cease-fire, Thieu could impair the whole package. On Thursday in Paris, North Vietnam's spokesman said the Saigon regime must sign that accord.

The United States and South Vietnam, therefore, each appears to have the capacity to block the other's intentions, unless one or the other breaks the stalemate by a new move. This is the decision that is awaited from the White House.

Removing Helms From the CIA Had to Be a 'Personal' Decision

THIS CITY'S BEST wisecracker proposed last summer to Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin that he make himself available as a replacement for Sen. Thomas Eagleton on the Democratic ticket. "Mr. Dobrynin," he said in mock seriousness, "you would not be fooled by briefings from the Defense Department about the strength of U.S. weapons. You would know."

I would not argue—even in the same vein—that Richard Helms, whom Mr. Nixon recently deposed as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, knows more about Soviet weapons than leaders in the Kremlin. But it is a demonstrable fact that he knows more about them than the Defense Department does. Helms was right, a couple of years ago, when the question of whether or not to build an ABM system was being argued in the Senate—and Melvin Laird, and his research chief, John Foster, were wrong.

Laird told the President that the Soviets were going for a first-strike capability with the development of the huge SS-9s. He predicted they would build them at the rate of 50 or 60 a year. By 1974, he suggested, the Soviet Union, possessed of 500 SS-9s, would be ready to call the tune.

IT WAS A FRIGHTENING prediction but it happened—perhaps by coincidence—to come at the time when President Nixon was trying to convince the U.S. Senate to embark upon an ABM system. Laird's predictions fitted neatly with the arguments Mr. Nixon's men were making on Capitol Hill. No doubt, the President was pleased to have them.

In this context, the word from Helms cannot have been pleasing. Helms said the Soviet Union was not going for a first strike; it would not build SS-9s at the rate of 50 or 60 per year; it would not reach the level of 500.

As it turned out, Helms was right and Laird and Foster were wrong. The Soviet Union built 34 more SS-9s and then stopped at 318; the balance of terror preserves the peace; nothing suggests that it can be disrupted by 1974.

I HAVE SINCE thought that Helms displayed courage in sticking to his view in the face of formidable opposition and his superior's obvious predilection for it. So I was disturbed when I learned Helms was to be dismissed as

"... he knows more about Soviet weapons than the Defense Department does."

chief of CIA and more disturbed when I consider the possible reasons for his dismissal.

Perhaps an admission for the record should be entered at this point: I served for some years as an associate of Helms' in the agency. I learned to respect his quiet pragmatism, to admire his ability and his human decency, and to stand in absolute awe of his uncanny ability to avoid having anything to do with those programs of the era which in retrospect should clearly have been handled by the army, the navy or Ringling Brothers Circus.

Nevertheless, I find myself hoping that Mr. Nixon doesn't like Helms at all. For it is easier to live with this thought than with the suspicion that Mr. Nixon doesn't like the intelligence which Helms has been giving him. Consider, for example, the following:

- That thousands of North Vietnamese agents hold jobs in the South Vietnamese government.
- That the Cambodian invasion will not halt infiltration.
- That the enemy headquarters or COSVN is not where the Department of Defense thinks it is.
- That the South Vietnamese army will not perform well in Laos.
- That the bombing will not cause North Vietnam to sue for peace.
- That mining Haiphong Harbor will not cut off supplies.

These cannot have been welcome views at the White House. But the important thing is that they were accurate views. So I hope the decision to dismiss Helms was not ideological. The CIA is one of the places in government which ought not to be asked to come up with something better.

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